



Chesterfield County

2004 Community Youth Forum
Results and Recommendations

Chesterfield County Youth Planning and Development is pleased to announce the success of the 2004 edition of the community youth forum.



On Nov. 18, 2004, the 11th annual SAY-SO! Strictly About Youth – Speak Out forum was held. The event brought together area youths and adults to discuss issues that are currently affecting young people. The Youth Services Citizen Board, Chesterfield County Department of Youth Planning and Development and the Midlothian Kiwanis Club sponsored the forum.

After enjoying a free pizza dinner, over 100 participants divided into their selected discussion groups. These group discussions, comprised of both adults and youths, provided a unique opportunity for youths to express their opinions to adults and for adults to share some life experiences with the youths.

Each of the seven discussion sessions were facilitated by one adult and one youth member of the Youth Services Citizen Board. Each participant had the opportunity to attend two 40-minute sessions during the evening.

We greatly appreciate the participation of all who attended and provided this very important feedback. This report contains the results and recommendations provided by each discussion group. Youth Planning and Development is delighted to share the opinions and suggestions of Chesterfield County youths and adults.

To receive additional copies of this report, please contact Youth Planning and Development at (804) 796-7100.

Discussion Group Topics

Bridging the Generation Gap

How can we encourage positive youth–adult relationships?

Asking for Help

How do we break the code of silence?

Where the Gangs Are

What's happening in Chesterfield County?

Life in the Fast Lane

How can teens cope with stress?

Bully Busting

How can we help young people feel safe?

I'm No Superman

Who are the adults teens look up to?

Bored with the Mall?

Promoting options for youths



BRIDGING THE GENERATION GAP

How can we encourage positive youth–adult relationships?

Facilitators: Jennifer Barlow, Stephanie Tompkins

Youths growing up in today's society are facing very different experiences and challenges than those once faced by the adults in our community. These experiential differences and solutions to bridge the gaps were the topic of discussion in this group.

Members of this discussion group spoke of various preferential differences facing youths and adults. Among these differences were: music and clothing preferences, priorities and energy levels.

The group also discussed the ways in which growing up today is different than when their parents (or other adult figures) grew up. Changes in morality, independence/freedom, accepted norms and family structure were all mentioned as major changes that have occurred as society has aged.

Most of the participants agreed that a gap has occurred between the generations and that we need to find ways to begin building strong relationships between youths and adults in our community. Suggested solutions and resources shared by the group included:

- 🗨 Building relationships within your family. Have a family dinner, family game night, or family outing at least once per week. This allows the family members to come together and share any successes, troubles, and interesting occurrences in their lives. The family members will feel more connected as a result of time spent together.
- 🗨 Change roles with an adult or youth. Spend a day at work with your parent or spend a day at school with your child. Walking a mile in his or her shoes will provide insight into daily activities and stresses. This insight will help develop a new appreciation for your child or parent.
- 🗨 Communicate openly and honestly. Listen and do not be judgmental.
- 🗨 Participate in mentoring programs. This benefits both youths and adults. It allows each pair to, over time, build a new relationship.
- 🗨 Promote countywide discounts for families attending activities together. Provide movie, bowling and skating packages for families at a reduced cost. This will encourage families to participate in these activities together, and they will strengthen their relationships while engaging in the activity.
- 🗨 Create a family activities Web site as a resource for family activities. On this Web site, list programs, entertainment opportunities and recreation events that are family friendly. This will supply families with a readily available list of ways to spend family time.

ASKING FOR HELP

How do we break the code of silence?

Facilitators: Vikki Barth, Katie Valentine, Bryce Burton

Youths sometimes feel they have no one with whom they can discuss personal issues. This group worked to identify the topics youths typically keep to



themselves, why they keep quiet about these topics, and what characteristics youths look for in a person they identify as a confidante.

The group felt youths do not discuss grades, relationships, stress at home, various problems, and elevated peer pressure.

These topics tend to be major sources of stress for youths today. This stress is compounded by the idea that teens are unwilling to discuss troubles they may be having in these areas with friends or adults.

Fear of being the subject of gossip and feeling that issues are too personal to discuss were mentioned as the main reasons youths do not discuss troubles with friends. Likewise, youths feared disappointing parents and getting in trouble, thus are unwilling to seek help from adults.

The discussion group participants indicated that, when youths are willing to discuss an issue, the following traits are desired in a confidante:

- 🗣 An individual they know they can trust
- 🗣 Someone who will know how to relate to him or her
- 🗣 A person with wisdom on the issue he or she is facing
- 🗣 Someone who is non-judgmental and will listen without bias

The group recommended developing a community with positive adult resources to aid youths. These adult resources may come from home, church, youth groups and school. The group felt it was important for youths to be encouraged to identify, at an early age, adults they could ask for help.

WHERE THE GANGS ARE

What's happening in Chesterfield County?

Facilitators: Donnell McLean, Candace Rheinhart, André Walters

The members in this discussion group focused on the definition of a gang. They discussed identifying characteristics that are specific to gangs and factors that could lead a young person to become involved in gang activity. Lastly, they formulated solutions that will help put a stop to gang activity in Chesterfield County.

The group identified a gang as having the following characteristics:

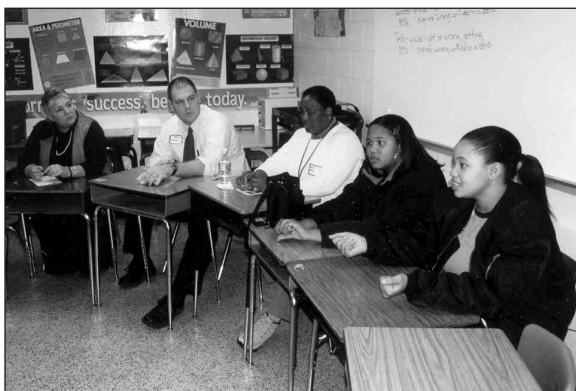
- 🗨️ A group that is larger than 2-3 people
- 🗨️ A sense of unity and family
- 🗨️ Involvement in selling drugs
- 🗨️ Designated colors and sign language specific to the gang
- 🗨️ Use of graffiti to mark territory
- 🗨️ Activities that often result in violence

Reasons why young people are led to join gangs were the next focus for the discussion group. The group felt many youths who join gangs do so due to a lack of feeling accepted by peers. Gangs provide these youths with a sense of belonging. The gang also gives these youths an identity.

The group members acknowledged the fact that there is gang activity in Chesterfield County, but they feel there are many ways to squelch future activity.

To start, the group feels it is important to begin educating elementary school students concerning the dangers of gang activity.

Educating children while they are young will deter them from joining gangs when they are older. The discussion group also suggested creating more safe places in



Chesterfield County for youths to interact. These facilities will help youths build relationships with other youths and create a sense of belonging. Lastly, the group pointed to community involvement as a solution to gang violence. It was recommended that citizens in a community not accept gang activity. If citizens see gang activity, graffiti or other signs of gang presence in their community, they should report it to the police.

How can teens cope with stress?

Facilitators: Katy Greenly, Wendell Roberts, Xuan Pham

Many youths today are feeling overwhelmingly stressed. The participants in this discussion group talked about many of these stressors, ideas for relaxing activities, and ways the county can help reduce some of the stress.

The group began the discussion by identifying issues that cause stress in the lives of our youths. Most agreed that stressors for youths include home relationships including separation or divorce of parents and custody issues, high expectations for school performance, success in class, acceptance to college, becoming involved in too many activities and peer pressure. As youths continue to mature, these stressors become more and more prevalent.

After identifying various sources of stress the group suggested ways for youths to relax. Many of the relaxation techniques involved physical activities such as playing sports, skateboarding, rock climbing, running, boxing and dancing. Less physical activities, such as hanging out with friends, going to church, playing a musical instrument, drawing, watching television and even sleeping were also suggested. The group agreed involvement in activities, which do not focus around schoolwork or planning for the future, is an essential component in providing youths opportunities to de-stress.

The group felt there were many ways in which the county can help relieve stress among youths. The suggestions included:

- 🗣 Breaking the barrier between students and teachers. Students rely on teachers as a resource for assignments and future opportunities. If students feel teachers are not available they may miss opportunities to excel. Encouraging students to ask for help from teachers and encouraging teachers to be a readily available resource for students will greatly help relieve stress.
- 🗣 Many students go home to empty houses when school is dismissed. This time is often very stressful for youths. The recommendation was made to allot more money for afterschool programming. These programs will provide students access to tutors and various activities that may not be available at home.
- 🗣 Reducing the fees for activities in school will also help alleviate stress. Involvement in activities at school allows youths to develop self-esteem, learn new skills, and relax in safe, supervised and protected environments. A reduction in fees for school-related activities would make them available to a broad range of students.

Organizational, time-management and study-skill seminars offered in school will also help relieve stress. Educating youths in these areas and giving them the proper tools to succeed will enable them to be more successful, self-confident and less stressed.

How can we help young people feel safe?

Facilitators: Toral Gandhi, Devan Vaughan, Penny Guillard

Bullying is a difficult challenge in the lives of many young people today. Self-esteem can be greatly damaged by being the victim of a bully. Many youths do not know what to do in a situation where they are being bullied or if they witness a bullying encounter. The members of this discussion group focused on what is bullying, types of bullying, students who may be susceptible targets of bullies, and what can be done to help prevent bullying.

Group members defined bullying as being mean, hitting, calling names and teasing, all of which may result in a lowering of the self-esteem of the bully's victim. Bullying supplies a sense of power and control to the bully. A bully gains self-esteem and satisfaction as a result of controlling another person. There are multiple methods of control that bullies use when targeting their victims. These methods include physical, emotional and verbal means of control. In comparison to bullying in the past, the methods of bullying today are much more internal and difficult to detect. Bullies today typically control their victims by means that are very difficult to prove. Defamation of character, creating gossip, intimidation and various other forms of verbal abuse are common methods used today by both male and female bullies.

Youths the discussion group members identified as having high susceptibility to bullying are those who have low self-esteem. Youths who have not proven that they will stand up for themselves, will have the confidence to get help, and those who are often alone in school are typically targets of bullies.

The group ended by supplying recommendations on how to confront and solve the issue of bullying. These recommendations included:

- ☛ First and foremost, empower the bystanders. Educate students so they know if they witness a bullying encounter that it is their responsibility to get help. Bullies thrive on an audience. If the audience members are willing to get help for the victim it removes the power from the bully, thus creating a situation where the bully does not feel successful.
- ☛ Begin a self-esteem curriculum with elementary-school students. Youths with high self-esteem are much less likely to be the victims of bullying. A student with high self-esteem who is willing to stand up for himself or herself will stop a bully in his or her tracks.
- ☛ Open lines of communication for victims and witnesses of bullying. Create a hot line that allows victims and bystanders the opportunity to call and anonymously report bullying incidents that they have encountered. Victims and bystanders must feel they have someone to whom they can report bullying incidents. Providing an opportunity by which the youth can report anonymously may increase the number of students who are willing to communicate about the issue.

Who are the adults teens look up to?

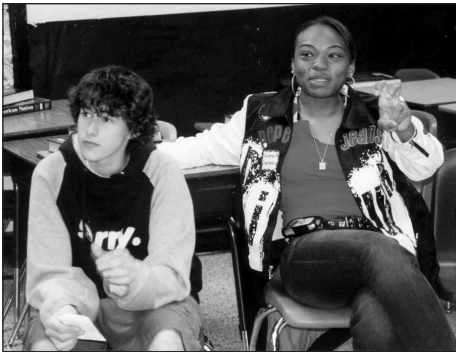
Facilitators: Nicholas Malone, Amanda Seymour

It is a fact that all youths need role models. Adolescence is a critical time for young people to have positive influences in their lives. Members of this discussion group identified role models who are present in the lives of teens. The group also compiled a list of characteristics teens look for in a role model.

Group members first identified family members as good role models for teens. The family members identified as role models include: mom, dad, grandparents and siblings. Many reasons were given as to why family members make good role models. The list included:

- Family members are always there for you.
- Older family members often have wisdom on topics youths have not yet experienced.
- Family members are willing to listen without judging.
- Youths trust members of their families.

The group also listed friends as role models. Friends can have an extremely positive influence in the lives of youths. Friends tend to understand exactly what



a peer is going through because they are often experiencing the same things at the same time. The group members felt that youths are very trusting of friends and often look to friends for advice.

Celebrities are another source of role models for youths. Youths often see celebrities who greatly excel in their craft as role models.

The group also felt a celebrity's willingness to make a positive difference in the community and charity work were both characteristics youths look for in a celebrity role model.

The group concluded with the following thoughts:

- Youths base choices for role models on values and characteristics they admire in a person.
- Role models chosen by youths have substance and are looking to make a positive change in the community.
- Youths are beginning to look within themselves to serve as role models for younger children.

BORED WITH THE MALL?

Promoting options for youths

Facilitators: Lynn Foote, Lauren Edwards

"There is nothing to do," is a quote heard all too often from youths in Chesterfield County. As a result, youths turn to the mall as their main source of entertainment. This discussion group talked about the positives and negatives of mall entertainment and offered many alternatives to the age-old issue, "There is nothing to do."

The discussion group gave the following as positive reasons to spend time at the mall. The mall offers a place to hang out with your friends free of charge. There is a lot to see, and there is no age requirement. It is safe, due to the fact that there is police supervision.

On the other hand, the discussion group found plenty of negatives associated with youths gathering at the mall. They included:

- An overall feeling in the group that many youths who are just "hanging" at the mall often get into trouble. With very loose supervision and no focused activity, youths tend to invent fun that leads to trouble.
- Hanging out at the mall with no money to buy items really is not fun. The lack of monetary resources may tempt youths to turn to shoplifting.
- The varying ages represented also present a problem. Younger youths may be subjected to discussions or experiences they should not encounter until they are much older.
- Lastly, violence is always a risk when unsupervised youths congregate.

Communication, the discussion group felt, was key in providing youths with much-needed alternatives to the mall. It was suggested that a Chesterfield County activities Web site be established to inform youths of safe, supervised and fun activities that are available to them in the Richmond area. The members also suggested morning announcements at school, activity postings in schools and school newsletters as great sources for communicating youth activities. Becoming involved in school events (clubs, open gyms, sports, etc.) was also suggested as a good alternative to congregating at the mall. The discussion group recommended the development of more teen centers. Teen centers provide youths free, supervised and safe places to associate with friends.

SUMMARY

To conclude the evening, each participant was asked to complete an evaluation. As an incentive, completed evaluations were entered into prize drawings. Prizes included a variety of items, such as coffee and cocoa sets, a tuxedo rental and various restaurant gift certificates.



The survey asked for feedback regarding the forum and ideas and suggestions for future forums. Participants also were given opportunities to suggest future forum topics. A total of 62 participants responded to the survey. One hundred percent of all respondents indicated that they enjoyed participating in the youth forum.

"Overall I thought the forum was..." responses received included:

Youth responses - A good idea. It gave us a chance to speak our thoughts; a wonderful experience; very educational; well run – good job; great; excellent; very interesting; helpful; informative.

Adult responses - Well planned, well led; well done - well thought out; great; excellent - thanks for the great opportunity; good experience; well worth the time, especially to hear student opinions.

Future forum topics suggested by participants included: peer pressure (relating to sex, drugs and alcohol), various types of abuse and how to overcome it, transitioning from teen to adulthood, influence of media on youths, developing healthy habits, youth violence, destructive decisions, teen pregnancy and diversity.

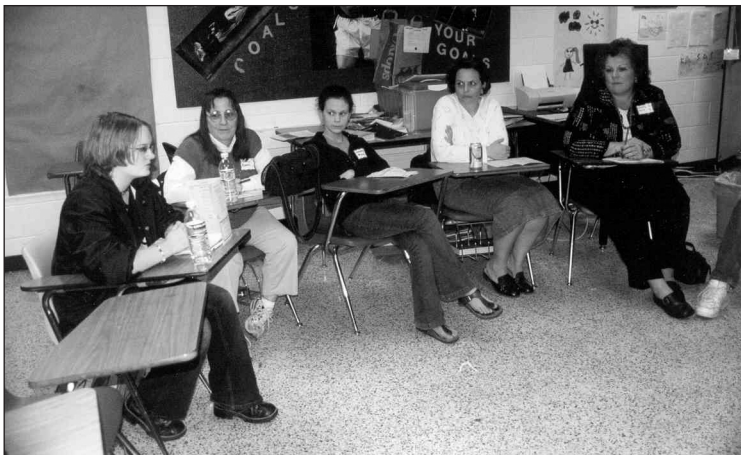
Youth Planning and Development and the Youth Services Citizen Board will use the information gathered from survey responses to make improvements as they plan for the next forum.

CONCLUSION

The Chesterfield County Youth Services Citizen Board and the Youth Planning and Development Department extend our heartfelt thanks to all who participated in our 2004 community youth forum. Due to individuals like you, who care enough to be involved in the Chesterfield community, our forum continues to be a success. Chesterfield County is a wonderful place to live and raise a family because of youth and adult participation and the desire of the citizens to make this county the best in the nation. We also greatly appreciate our volunteers and facilitators for their leadership and support. Thank you for giving your time and your continued dedication to this project.

Information gathered from the discussion groups will be used to assist in developing and refining strategies for implementing the county's comprehensive youth-development plan. We invite forum participants and other community members to build on the forum by expanding and further exploring the ideas and strategies generated in the discussion groups.

If we can assist you in any way, or if you would like more information, please contact Youth Planning and Development at 796-7100 or e-mail youthservices@chesterfield.gov.



What are Developmental Assets?

Why do some young people grow up with ease while others struggle? Why do some youths get involved in dangerous activities, while others spend their time making contributions to the community?

Many factors influence why some young people have success and why others struggle. Economic circumstances, genetics, trauma and many other factors play roles. But these factors are not all that matter. Research conducted by the Search Institute has identified 40 concrete, positive experiences and qualities - developmental assets - that have a positive influence on each young person's life. The Search Institute surveyed more than 200,000 sixth- and 12th-graders to determine the relationship between assets and types of behaviors.

Researchers found that the more developmental assets a student reported having, the less they reported being involved in drug use and violence. The same was true for delinquency and a host of other problem behaviors. The relationship between high levels of assets and fewer risky behaviors and more healthy behaviors holds true for all the young people surveyed, no matter what their ethnic heritages, languages, economic situations or geographical locations.

The traditional approach to addressing youth problems has been to fix the problems. Focusing on assets requires a paradigm shift, a change in attitude - moving beyond fixing the problems and moving toward affirming and increasing the strengths of young people. Assets are not programs for young people. Assets are about adults building positive relationships with the community's young people and seeing the youths as resources. Young people are also responsible for building assets for themselves, with their friends and with younger children, and they can do good things for their community.

If each person takes a little time and looks for places to intentionally make a difference by building developmental assets, he or she can have an impact. Simple things, such as learning young peoples' names and calling them by their names, can make a difference. The goal is to ensure that there is a community environment where every young person feels welcome, respected, cared for and useful. The community wants that - and the community has the ability to help make it happen.



Youth Services Citizen Board

Bermuda District

Diann DeLaPena, adult

Marcus Childress, Thomas Dale High School

Clover Hill District

Penny Gulliland, adult

Nicholas Malone, adult

Cari Mueller, Clover Hill High School

Toral Ghandi, Clover Hill High School

Ginny Fuller, Monacan High School

Sara Adcock, Monacan High School

Dale District

Stephanie Tompkins, adult

Vikki Barth, adult

André Walters, Meadowbrook High School

Xuan Pham, Meadowbrook High School

Katy Greenly, L.C. Bird High School

Amanda Seymour, L.C. Bird High School

Matoaca District

Donnell McLean, adult

Lynne Foote, adult

Devan Vaughan, Matoaca High School

Bryce Burton, Matoaca High School

Candace Rheinart, Manchester High School

Midlothian District

Sharon Cason-Card, adult

Wendell Roberts, adult

Katie Valentine, Midlothian High School

Jennifer Barlow, Midlothian High School

Lauren Edwards, James River High School

Mary Konkright, James River High School



Jana D. Carter, director

Sharyl Adams, substance abuse prevention specialist

Amy Wells, youth development specialist

Patty Glazier, secretary

Special thanks to the following organizations that contributed to the SAY-SO Forum! We greatly appreciate your generosity and support.

Carrabba's Italian Grill

Children's Museum of Richmond

Flagstop

Holiday Inn Select, Koger Center South

Jessica Morgan School of Dance

Kohl's

Ledo's Pizza

Life Touch Photography

Linens & Things

Little Caesars Pizza

Melting Pot

Peak Experience

S&K Menswear

Virginia Science Museum

Special thanks to David Carter for providing the photos used in this report.



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